The experience of asylum-seeking children in school told through life histories

My overall research interest is on asylum-seeking children in Swedish schools. During the year 2003, 8568 children arrived in Sweden with their families and 561 arrived on their own, seeking political asylum. Most of these children attend regular school, to varying degrees. Research has been done about social issues or psychological issues concerning asylum-seeking children, but my intention is to investigate how a young person in this situation feels and thinks about it, and how they handle their everyday lives.

When light is directed at issues concerning these children in the media, they are often portrayed as victims of unfair asylum processes, and as traumatized by the same, not seldom in dramatic articles or TV programs (see e.g. Kalla fakta (eng. “the Bare Facts”, a Swedish news program, [www.tv4.se](http://www.tv4.se)) keyword Kalla fakta). Often these children have traumatizing experiences of war or persecution. When arriving in a new country they don’t speak the language at first and don’t know how long they will stay, and under those circumstances they also attend school. This is undoubtedly an unusual situation. However, for the children who go through this, it is their everyday life. Most of them will not be on television or have their story told in the papers. Most of them will attend school and live as “normally” as they can. It is this aspect that is of interest to me, the experiences of children whose every day life consists of the uncertainty of the asylum process, and how that affects school life, friendships and thoughts about the future. I believe that there is a need for knowledge about these children; more specifically how they experience their situation and handle the same. My tentative research question is: How do asylum-seeking children experience their situation in school? My choice of research method is life history, and I plan to interview ten teenagers.

In this paper, I will focus on one life history, Yasmin, who is a nineteen-year-old boy from Bosnia, and discuss his story in relation to the theoretical concept of life chances as a first preliminary analysis.
Yasmin’s story

Yasmin is a nineteen-year-old boy, who is originally from Bosnia. He lives with his mother and sister. His parents are divorced and he has no contact with his father. I have chosen, after a preliminary interpretation, to present his story in five different themes. The themes are still close to the original interview material, and I will continue to work with the interpretation.

Starting school in Germany

When Yasmin was seven years old, the war in former Yugoslavia broke out. He fled to Germany with his mother and younger sister. Immediately upon arriving in Germany, Yasmin started school, in first grade. There was no introduction, he did not speak the language, and didn’t like it at all:

Yasmin: When I was six-seven years old we moved to Germany because of the war in Bosnia and it felt very, really hard to go to school there ((mhm)) I didn’t know the language and I was sent right away to regular class ((ok)) with German students and everything and I didn’t understand anything of (...) I, I was sent to a, in that first school with, like I went there for only like a week, I didn’t want to go there anymore ((no)) and, my mom thought too “we are going back to Bosnia, the war will end again” and, she told me to stay home, we’ll be going back soon, but we didn’t and then when we moved to a different apartment, I started school again ((mhm)) but a different school and then (...) I didn’t want to go too but (...) my mom made me a little and she wanted me to, that I should go to school, and it was really hard I remember everything ((mhm)) first day and (...) I was sitting there, everyone was looking at me and I said and didn’t understand anything, in the first and second grade I didn’t understand much what they I think it started in third grade I started to talk a little

After a few years, with the support of his teacher and classmates, he started to speak the language and things got easier:

Yasmin: I was kind of little and I didn’t understand much, I came a little like, after the war ((mhm)) it was pretty hard because you didn’t know anyone, just my mom and my sister ((mhm)) and you had to go that school and when someone asked, if the teacher asked you something you didn’t understand anything and everyone was looking at you and stuff (...) that was the hardest but like (...) they understood and stuff but the teacher tried to talk to me and stuff ((mhm)) I maybe, in the third grade maybe, in the beginning I didn’t want to talk, maybe I was afraid to talk ((mhm)) and then the teacher started to talk to me, she wanted me to talk to her and ((mhm)) and it was, the third grade was maybe like my breakthrough with the language (...) but I was treated pretty good by the students in Germany ((mhm)) they were really nice and, it was pretty good there
Returning to Bosnia

The family stayed in Germany for eight years, granted stay for six months at a time. After eight years, the German and Bosnian government cooperated to get as many Bosnians as possible to return. Yasmin and his family returned, on the promise that the mother would be given a job and an apartment. This did not work out. Yasmin was now fifteen and found it difficult to adjust to school in Bosnia. He was very young when they left, and had never attended school there:

Yasmin: Mhm, and I went to, from first grade to eighth grade I never went to a Bosnian school before I, and when (...) we weren’t allowed to stay in Germany, they said now, now the war is over and now you have to go back and then we went back to Bosnia, we got an apartment in Sarajevo ((mhm)) but we didn’t live there before the war and stuff ((mhm)) we lived in another town but there were Serbs living in our village so then ((mhm)) and we had to live in Sarajevo, it didn’t feel very good, I had to start over (...) go again, in a Bosnian class, it felt very, like, hard to start again in another class and (...) it was kind of hard and you were a little bullied and, everything you said in Bosnian was wrong and they started to laugh and stuff (XX) and after nine months we said that, that we would move to Sweden ((mhm)) because of, that I wasn’t much a kid in Bosnia so that’s why it was very hard for me, because I had another, I’ve learned another mentality and culture in Germany than in Bosnia

Yasmin: ... in Bosnia they don’t care /.../ like, some teachers in Bosnia try to (...) bully someone, in the class ((mhm))) /.../ in Bosnia they have a different mentality they, like, when you’re going to say something you have to stand up and, it was, I wasn’t used to that /.../ and one time, it was a Bosnian teacher, and one time I was sitting down kind of and she asked me something and I was supposed to stand up and say, but she got really mad because I was ehm, sitting, still sitting down and she called my mother and said “he is acting like this”, like I’m not, I wasn’t used to standing up, I always forget

Moving to Sweden

After nine months in Bosnia, Yasmin and his family decided to seek political asylum in Sweden. They were not happy in Bosnia, and Yasmin wanted a chance at a better education. Generally, he found it easier in Sweden because he made friends who were in the same situation. At first, he attended what is called Swedish for immigrants and then studied a high school preparatory program for a year, before starting in an ordinary high school class.

Yasmin: Here in Sweden it wasn’t so hard because (...) because there were also other people from other countries ((mm)) and they didn’t know good Swedish too and (...) we had a lot of fun together, I have a lot of friends that are, that are here today to that, that I got to know in [preparatory class] /.../ and I came in better here, in this class in this school and with the language than in Bosnia /.../ and when I switched to this class (...) it was (...) maybe too a little harder because I had no friends, I was alone ((mhm)) but I got to know some friends who, who came from Bosnia in my class (...) it was a little like, but (...) it was a little hard to become part of, of (...) the class, this class ((mm)) but it was better the second year, it’s a lot better now than the first year
Friendships

An important reason why Yasmin likes it in Sweden is his friendships. He talks a lot about his friends, and stresses on several occasions how important they are to him. He almost exclusively hangs out with other immigrants that he got to know when he first came to Sweden. He rarely socialises with his Swedish-born classmates outside of school.

Ulrika: Who, can you tell me a little about who you hang out with, in school and out of school...?

Yasmin: It’s mostly the immigrants that I was friends with at [Swedish for Immigrants] ((mhm)) there is a friend from there, I am very close with him ((mm)) he is from Somalia too ((mm)) and he has some friends that (…) that also come from Somalia and I got to know them, and they’re really good friends too /…/ I have a friend in my class, a guy from Bosnia, he’s a good friend too but not like you know (…) I don’t hang out with him outside of school and stuff /…/ I think I mostly hang out with immigrants

Ulrika: Why do you think that is?

Yasmin: I don’t know (…) us immigrants /…/ maybe we understand each other better and stuff ((mm)) maybe we can joke about something that, that Swedish friends don’t think is funny /…/ I mean, I have a great relationship with those, my classmates, but I can’t imagine having, having fun with them, to spend like five days with them and stuff ((no)) it wouldn’t be fun, but in school it’s okay

Living as an asylum – seeker

For Yasmin, who has spent most of his life seeking asylum, being in that situation has become a “normal” state. But when the family received their first notice of deportation, he took it hard. He didn’t care about school; the only reason for going to school was his friends. After four years they have now received their final notice and are to be deported. Yasmin has a year left of his high school – education, and he hopes that the family will get to stay so that he can graduate.

Ulrika: How does it feel to go to school when, when you don’t know...

Yasmin: The first year when we came here it was (...) we lived with my mom’s aunt then, it was really hard then, after one year I thought, we got this first decision ((mhm)) and it was a negative decision ((mhm)) that, that we were going back and before, before the decision I thought we were going to stay and stuff, I had hopes and, and after that I felt completely down in school and, I didn’t have the energy to go I thought “why should I go if I’m leaving in maybe two months, you never know” but (...) the only thing I, to, that I came to school is maybe my friends because I had a good time with them in school ((mhm)) that’s maybe why I went to school (...) the more, the less you think about it and stuff it feels better ((mhm)) if you like think about it, “oh if you, if I get a positive decision” and stuff ((mhm)) and then later you get a negative you feel very depressed ((mhm)) it’s best if you don’t think about it and stuff ((mhm)) (...) now it’s pretty good, so I feel pretty good, but the second year was very hard ((mhm)) because then I thought, I just said to my mom “let’s go back, we’re going back anyone why not go now” (...) but now I feel better
Yasmin talks about the conditions that he and his family lives under. They have now lived in Sweden for four years, and his mother has not worked at all during that time; you are not allowed to work unless you have a residence permit. Yasmin is glad that he has school to go to, so he can keep himself occupied.

Yasmin: It [the asylum seeking process] takes kind of a long time ((mhm)) it would be better if they, it they (...) if they decided in maybe six months, like seven-six months, four and a half years that’s a pretty long time, you adjust to the society and you can’t say “go back” then you have to adjust again to the country where you’re going and (...) no, it doesn’t work, like, it takes a pretty long time ((mhm)) we got, we got our first decision after maybe a year or two, I think it was two, one and a half years that’s a pretty long time ((mhm)) and then (...) but it wasn’t the real decision, like, it’s a pretty long time ((mhm)) and then (...) the one that’s real ((mhm)) you can appeal the first one ((yes)) then you get, then you get the second one and stuff and (...) I felt very depressed and ((mhm)) (...) but now it’s pretty ok /.../ we might try (...) to play for time for me to have, to get an education here and ((mhm)) and then it’s, then it’ll be easier to go back (...) it might change a little too with the law and ((mhm)) that’s what we’re hoping for

Ulrika: Are you thinking about anything in particular?

Yasmin: That they will like change, that they’ll say for example in the government that some immigrants get to stay and stuff (...) maybe we could have stayed in Germany but, it was the, some ministers from Bosnia, they said they would get money to, to sign that they would get to go back ((ok)) immigrants from Germany, and then they signed and everybody got to go, eh back((mhm)) you know you get money, the German state gives money to Bosnia to build new houses and, to the immigrants who come back but most of them didn’t, maybe they used the money for something else (...) they told us we would get an apartment in Sarajevo and mom would get a job ((mhm)) mom thought it would be good to like get a job, because she would be working, but she didn’t, when she, when she went there to Sarajevo then, then (XX) but we only got the apartment, where we got to live for two years then you have to move again (...) and some relatives they lived in, they lived in another town that’s, that’s kind of, further away (...) and my mom, she was home alone all the time and stuff ((mhm)) ‘til we came home from school, she felt depressed and she, she didn’t have a job and stuff, it’s the same thing here now in Sweden ((mhm)) she’s not allowed to work, you can’t get a working permit (...) she would like to work because it’s kind of boring to just sit at home all day ((mhm)) she’s completely bored and she doesn’t feel well, depressed all day ((mhm)) (...) like, I don’t know how I would feel if I, if I didn’t go to school, sometimes when I’m sick and stuff I go to school because it’s pretty boring at home and you have nothing to do and...

Yasmin’s experience of being an asylum – seeker is mostly negative. It means that you cannot travel or buy things that you might want, because you have to be prepared to leave on short notice.

Yasmin: Like, when you’re used to it, living like this ((mhm)) it’s not good to live like this just (...) without any, you can’t plan you future, I would like to go to Germany and visit my relatives there ((mhm)) maybe go to Las Vegas where I have some friends too but I can’t, you’re not allowed to go anywhere (...) you (...) you can’t buy, you can’t buy anything, anything that you can’t take to Bosnia or stuff like that (...) you have to, if you want to buy something you have to say like “wait ‘til you get the decision” and stuff
Life chances

Life chances are a theoretical concept, mainly used in sociology. My use of the concept is based on Dahrendorf’s (1979) thoughts about this concept. He advocates life chances as a mean for understanding human history, without assuming that change necessarily entails progress. Life chances differ throughout history, and provide us with tools for analyzing the conditions in different societies. Life chances as a theoretical concept is often used as a framework in discussions concerning social mobility, and is therefore a useful theory in this case. Humans are born with different life chances, depending on the family and the circumstances under which they are brought up. Life chances, however, are not the same as education; rather, they are a consequence of for example education (Åberg, 1992; Nilsson & Wigg, 2001).

According to Dahrendorf (1979), life chances are: \textit{opportunities for individual growth, for the realisation of talents, wishes and hopes, and these opportunities are provided by social conditions} (Dahrendorf, 1979, p 30). Life chances are not personal attributes of individuals, but should be understood as a concept to describe opportunities the individual has in society (Dahrendorf, 1979; Nilsson & Wigg, 2001).

Life chances consist of two elements, options and ligatures. Options can also be described as potential, either personal faculties or potential in society. Options are the possibility to choose, or \textit{alternatives of action given in social structure} (Dahrendorf, 1979, p 30). Ligatures are social networks, or allegiances. The individual is placed into different ligatures based on social positions and roles. Ligatures are often laden with emotions, which is expressed in the terms used: forefathers, home country etc. (Dahrendorf, 1979).

Possibilities to realize options exist because there are social relationships. These relationships, however, can of an open of closed nature. An open relationship does not prohibit participation, but is open to all who want to participate. A closed relationship, in contrast, limits, prohibits or states conditions for participation (Weber, 1983 [1956]; Dahrendorf, 1979).

To take a contemporary example, options might be a talent or an interest in music and an interest in pursuing a career. A possibility to realise this goal might be an audition for a talent TV show, which would give you the chance to develop your talent. In talent search TV shows, the eye of the needle is very narrow; it is not open for all. In this case, the relationship is a closed one; the ligatures are restricting.

What distinguishes a society from another is, among other things, the balance of options and ligatures (Levine & White, 1986). If there is a maximum of options, it does not follow that there is a maximum of life chances. Dahrendorf writes: \textit{Ligatures without options are oppressive, whereas options without bonds [ligatures] are meaningless} (1979, p 31). Ligatures are given, while options are wanted. However, life chances are
not instrumental, that is, they do not automatically lead to an improved situation and should not be understood as simply alternatives to choose from.

If the individual has no options, there are no possibilities to realise goals. If there are options but no ligatures, Dahrendorf means that the options are meaningless. Strong ligatures can be limiting, but too many options often come at a loss of ligatures which in turn renders the options useless (or at least less valuable) since there are no ways of realizing them.

Perhaps it might also be useful to differ between types of ligatures. In Yasmin’s case, his friendships and his immediate family are important to him. These ligatures are not enabling in that they give opportunities in society. Rather, they are important on another level, giving the individual a sense of belonging. These ligatures are of a personal nature, and are close to the individual.

Then there are ligatures in the form of larger structures, such as laws (e.g. asylum rules) etc. These ligatures are further removed from the individual, and have a more direct, role in giving opportunities or restricting options. The individual also has less control over these larger structures than the ones that are closer.

In the analysis of Yasmin’s life history, both types of structures are of importance. Ligatures in the form of rules for residence permits states conditions for Yasmin’s life that he cannot control. Ligatures in the form of his family, friends, relatives etc, are recurring aspects in his story, as more immediate networks.
A preliminary analysis

Yasmin’s life so far has been characterized by upheaval. Several times circumstances outside his, or his family’s, control have brought with them changes. In moving to Sweden they attempted to regain control, but the rules here were restrictive. In Yasmin’s story, there are a number of accounts that can be analysed as life chances.

When Yasmin and his family fled from Bosnia, there was a disruption in ligatures. For quite some time, the relationships in the German school were closed to Yasmin. Starting school and not being able to speak the language, the ligatures being closed to him, it also meant a limitation in realizing options. However, since he was so young, Yasmin adjusted, learnt the language and coped quite well in school.

After a while, Yasmin learned the language, and the relationships with the others developed. Yasmin does not talk of any particular friends or relatives in Germany, but presumably after eight years, he had built some ligatures, which were then disrupted again when the family was forced to move back to Bosnia. But Yasmin does leave a gap in his story regarding friendships in Germany. What that indicates is still an open question for me.

One aspect of cultural difference is the balance of life chances. In Bosnian schools, the ligatures are stronger, and this was limiting for Yasmin. His troubles in school in Bosnia, with the language, the methods (e.g. the discipline), and the level of the classes can be seen a limitation in options and a restriction by stronger ligatures than he was used to. Having lived in Germany for eight years, there were few relatives left, and Yasmin didn’t really have any network to rely on. In school, relationships were closed. These limitations led Yasmin and his family to once again leave Bosnia.

The family then moved to Sweden, since they had relatives here it and thought Yasmin would have a better education here. School here worked better for Yasmin. For Yasmin, school has been somewhat of a haven. He is there on the same conditions as everyone else, and school in Sweden has been relatively open for him. In school, he has the possibility to realize one of his wishes: to get an education.

Yasmin stresses the importance of his friendships, which can be seen as new ligatures. Perhaps friendships are so important to Yasmin because his life has been disrupted so many times. He also had new options, in the form of education. He seems to identify with other immigrants and refugees, but not with other Bosnians. He doesn’t have any Swedish friends; the relationships are closed, perhaps both ways. He talks about himself as different from Swedes, but also from Bosnians. Ehn et al (1997) talk about how we create stories of national identity, of an identity that includes everyone who is perceived as a citizen of that particular country. Those stories also exclude those who are not considered citizens. Yasmin creates a story of being something other than Swedish, Bosnian or German. He identifies with other immigrants, for example his friends from Somalia and that identity is based on nationality or ethnicity.
When you are seeking asylum in another country, there are a lot of restrictions, as Yasmin states. Refugees are limited; they cannot work, travel, or buy things that they cannot take with them the next day, if necessary. The ligatures surrounding them are very strong, and they have few options. Yasmin and his family have received their final decision, and they are not allowed to stay. Once again, there is the threat of loss of ligatures, loss of options and the structure has proven to be closed for him.

Concluding remarks

Throughout his life, Yasmin has had to continually adjust to new circumstances, not knowing when those circumstances may change again. Given this situation, his life chances are limited. An issue to continue to work with is how the individual handles and experiences his or her life chances.

Despite his situation, Yasmin seems determined to create new options for himself, but sees no possibilities to do so in Bosnia. He hopes to go to Germany or Canada where he has relatives. This raises questions to what extent an individual can create or influence his or her own life chances.

For the immediate future, I will continue doing interviews with teenagers who are or have been asylum-seekers. Further interviews will no doubt change the interpretations and analysis of this life history.
References


Websites

[www.tv4.se](http://www.tv4.se), keyword Kalla Fakta